

Syphilis Eye Disease in King County

Public Health Alert for Gay & Bi Men

January 22, 2015

Six cases of ocular syphilis have been identified in WA State since mid-December, 2014. Four of these cases were diagnosed in King County, including three cases in gay and bisexual men. Two of these cases resulted in permanent blindness. Of the King County cases, three also had HIV.

Syphilitic eye disease is unusual, but it is a complication that can happen in early as well as late stages of infection. Early treatment can cure syphilis and prevent permanent damage.

Initial symptoms of ocular syphilis can be subtle. They may include:

- *blurry vision*
- *floaters (spots that float by through your vision)*
- *a blue tinge in vision*
- *flashing lights*
- *eye pain*

*If not treated, these symptoms can progress to loss of vision. **With early treatment, the symptoms will usually go away.** Delayed treatment can result in permanent blindness.*

What to do:

Sexually active gay and bi men who are not in mutually monogamous relationships should:

- Use condoms and limit your number of sex partners.
- Be aware of symptoms for syphilis and other STIs. Learn more at kingcounty.gov/health/std.
- Get tested for syphilis if you experience any of the vision problems listed above.
- Get tested for STIs – including syphilis and HIV – at least once a year. Get tested every 3 months if any of the following are true for you in the last year:
 - ⇒ had 10 or more sex partners
 - ⇒ had unprotected anal sex with a partner whose HIV status is positive or not known
 - ⇒ used poppers
 - ⇒ used meth
 - ⇒ had gonorrhea, chlamydia, or syphilis
- Consider taking PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) for HIV, especially if any of the activities above are true for you. PrEP can protect you from HIV, but not from syphilis.

One shot of antibiotics will usually cure syphilis.

Don't delay. Get tested. Get cured.

Public Health 
Seattle & King County

STD Clinic at Harborview
908 Jefferson Street, 11th floor

SYPHILIS – Easy to Get. Easy to Cure.

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. Symptoms are easy to miss, and easy to mistake for something else. Even if you don't notice symptoms, you can still be infected. Each stage of syphilis looks different.

Primary Syphilis presents as a raised open sore on the genitals, mouth or rectum. It's easy to miss because it's painless. It usually shows up 1-3 weeks after exposure, though it can sometimes take months. The sore can last several weeks and go away by itself. But the syphilis will not be gone. **Eye problems can start at this stage.**

Secondary Syphilis usually starts with a reddish-brown spotted rash on one of more areas of the body. Most often the rash is on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet, but it can show up other places, too. The rash usually does not itch, and sometimes it's very subtle. The rash can come and go for up to 2 years. Other symptoms may include swollen lymph nodes, fever, fatigue, patchy hair loss, weight loss, and headache. **Eye and vision problems can also happen at this stage.**

Latent Syphilis starts when secondary symptoms go away. During this stage there are no signs of symptoms. The infection can be detected only by a blood test. A relapse to secondary syphilis can occur during the first couple years of latency.

Tertiary (Late) Syphilis. About a third of people who don't get treated suffer serious damage to the brain, nervous system, heart, or other organs. Tertiary syphilis can cause paralysis, dementia, **blindness**, deafness, heart failure and even death. Treatment at this stage will cure the disease and stop future damage. But it cannot repair or reverse damage that has already occurred.

Learn more about syphilis at:
SyphilisInSeattle.com.